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Religion and Mark Twain via "Letters from the Earth"

Bruno Bettelheim's interpretation of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis shows the underlying feelings that led to Mark Twain's shift in religious paradigm. Mark Twain's posthumously attributed state of mind during the latter period of his life, religious pessimism, was due to the severity and frequency of personal tragedies he had experienced up unto this point. This ultimately resulted in his questioning of faith and his ultimately being called a positive atheist. This stemmed from a desire from come to terms with personal loss in the face of hypocrisy in his fellow humans as well as the suffering Twain himself endured. In tandem with these are the biographical events which lead Twain down this path, in which he acquired no less the sense of spiritual wonder, but rather the failing desire for good or ill to adhere to the Christian dogma of his time. Criticisms of Mark Twain's religious perspective, biographical basis, and come of the criticisms and controversies surrounding the work at its time of release are included below to provide context. Bettelheim's interpretation of psychoanalysis provides the audience the broader of the two lenses in which the source text is viewed. Biographical information on personal tragedy in Twain's life and religious interpretation, as well as a brief conceptual overview of "Letters From the Earth" Following which will be an psychoanalysis of sections from "Letters From the Earth" combined views on human hypocrisy in terms of their true nature and religiosity.

Conceptually speaking, the largest difference between Bettelheim's interpretations of Freud's psychoanalytical theories are attributed to mistranslation. A fundamental example of this, according to Bettelheim, is the misinterpretation of Psyche to mean mind rather than soul. Bettelheim explains this with a comparison between the English and German, "...in English the accent in "psychoanalysis" is on "analysis", thus emphasizing the part of the word whose connotations is scientific. With the German word *Psychoanalyse*, on the other hand, the accent is on the first syllable--- on "psyche," the soul."(11). This expresses not only the possibilities for mistranslation or misinterpretation, but the missing humanistic element from the English interpretation of Freud's work. Freud's focus on the soul, in his view referring to the essence of a person rather than in a religious context, was a hallmark of his theories to his native Germans. This and subsequent attempts to medicalize the terminology of psychoanalysis during the initial English translations rendered the theories, as they arrived in North America, impersonal and sterile. While Freud himself had an aversion when it came to religion, the underlying psychological and emotional discovered through psychoanalysis serve as a fundamental expression of Twain's essence. This in turn, within his work, is expressed through a religious satire that is reflective of his own concerns and cynicism. In the tradition of psychoanalysis, an interpretation of the source text in the same vein as dream interpretation to find subconscious motivations and feelings follows sections of "Letters from the Earth," followed by interpretations based on Twain's views on hypocrisy in human religiosity.

Of the tragedies in Twain's life, those of his latter years had the most impact. In 1894 the Paine Compositor Manufacturing Company of which he was a heavy investor went bankrupt, costing Twain between one hundred seventy five thousand and three hundred thousand. Desperate to make up the funds, Twain embarked on a lecture tour of

Europe. While still abroad and attempting to recover his financial losses; his daughter Susy, age 25, died of spinal meningitis. Regarding this death Twain had written, "He recalled parting on the [train] platform of [1895], with Susy waving in the glare of the electric lights" (Powers 561). This was the first of many personal tragedies following on the heels of his financial loss. This along with the bankruptcy set the initial stages of his despondency, while the latter deaths only served to deepen it. His wife Olivia died in 1905 of long term illness. To this Twain wrote, "I am tired and old; I wish I were with Livy" (561). Compounding these sorrows was the death of his daughter Jean in 1909 at the age of 29; having drown in a bathtub. Beginning with the death of his wife, and continuing on with the death of Jean, Twain's despondency changed into a wish for death. Given his depression over these events, his cynicism toward religion grew, and he felt envious of his departed loved ones for having escaped the drudgery of daily life. The despair this caused Twain was obvious in the lines, "Would I bring her back to life if I could do it? I would not...In her loss I am almost bankrupt, and my life is bitterness, yet I am content; for she has been enriched with the most precious of all gifts...death" (561). Rather than completely giving up on life, instead Twain turned toward his writing as an outlet for his feelings of cynicism, loss, and depression. While he was unable to recapture the meaning to life he felt escaped with his loved ones, that did not remove his satirical wit or irascible charm. This tragedy did not remove Twain's humor so much as give it a darker edge as he sought to reconcile the losses he endured with his witty nature and desire to find perhaps a legitimate reason for his suffering. As Diane Plotkin indicates in her study of Twain's atheism, "Twain's feelings of despondency, which are evident in these later works, are expressed through the words of his characters. For this reason, although his writings still tended to be humorous, the tone of many of them, especially those he wrote later in his life, was often dark" (2). Through these writings Twain

explored his own feelings and attitudes, and whether by accident or design sought reconciliation of his truth and his loss. This combined with a deepening of religious cynicism were expressed in his views on Immaculate Conception, and put to paper in “Letters from the Earth.” His attitudes on how Christianity has been created to mollify humanity can be best expressed through his view on Immaculate Conception in “Reflections on Religion”:

“The Immaculate Conception rests wholly upon the testimony of a single witness—a witness whose very existence has nothing to rest upon but the assertion of a young peasant wife whose husband needs to be pacified...Mary’s testimony satisfied him but that is because he lived in Nazareth and not New York.” (Neider 35).

The above passage speaks on many levels of his less than optimistic viewpoint of religion and lack of faith in humankind. The commentary not only seeks to diminish what many of the time considered a biblical miracle, but to imply a more base justification for the story more indicative of what he felt was truly human nature. His allusion to New York reflects his opinion that the time, context, and desire to avoid shame were believed due to the superstitious attitudes of biblical times.

Twain considered himself a “positive atheist” that studied religion as an unbeliever with the hope of finding reason behind creation while disavowing human constructed self-serving hypocrisy. Critics noted however his prodigious use of religious imagery in his writing, “—there are more biblical references in [Twain’s] collected works than references to any other literary work or figure” (Townsend 59). While this is true, it is arguably one of the most effective ways to communicate his beliefs to his readers in imagery that they will readily understand. Likewise, this provided an outlet for not only

his issues with religion, but his deepening depression. For his part, Twain views religion as follows:

...religions derive their authority from spurious claims by their founders that they had received revelations from God, transmitted to posterity as incontrovertibles as holy writ. Bibles diminished the grandeur of the real God by straightening him to the narrow confines of parochial imaginations (Townsend 59).

In this Twain demonstrate not so much of an atheistic point of view so much as disillusionment with humanity. This is what he views as his positive atheism, which regardless of the misuse of the term provides some overall insight to his life views. Twain sought to find a meaning in humanity without a judgement clouded by religion. Likewise, his growing aversion to religious thought, in a way, was an attempt to justify his personal loss. If humanity is the only factor outside of chance, then the events that befell him are more easily palatable. Particular to Twain's disgruntlement is the New Testament. That is, he reserved the majority of his discontent for this part of the bible, viewing the Old Testament as; "The Old one gives us a picture of these people's Deity as he was before he got religion, the other one gives us a picture of him as he appeared afterward. The Old Testament is interested mainly in blood and sensuality. The New one in Salvation by fire (sic) (Twain, Letters 44)." His discontent in the latter was mainly in that while the Old Testament was fairly primal, and to his mind, more honestly expressed human nature and a retributive God. The New Testament was a combination of overindulgent optimism and permanent punishment, to Twain's mind. In this he felt present another example of human hypocrisy, as the fundamental truths of the Old Testament altered into the new fundamental truths of the New Testament, according to the popular opinions of society. Additionally, in reference to both the bible and his view on religion, Twain writes the following:

I have almost been a believer, but it immediately drifts away from again. I don't believe one word of your Bible was inspired by God any more than any other book. I believe it was the work of man from beginning to end – atonement and all (Townsend 60).

Thus reiterating that his issue was not so much with God as it was for the people claiming to know Him and do His will. He felt that regardless of the content or the time of origin, the bible served as an exploration of human justifications for right and wrong, indulgence and denial. His indication that he kept drifting close and then away speaks of an internal desire for an outside justification for the events of his life, particularly those he deemed most unfortunate. However, in the end he was unable to find any surcease of sorrow in religion, instead seeing it as a grand excuse for people unwilling to accept that life happens.

Twain came under fire for this work even though it was not published until well after his death, in 1962. Arthur Geb of the New York Times considered the work “A series of highly inflammatory anti-religious essays written by Mark Twain in his later years”(1). Which reflects the sentiment of the time of its publication. Given the mindset of the times, the message within the work was ultimately missed. And in an ironic twist, later on the same criticisms brought the work increasing popularity. Twain’s disregard for what he felt was self-serving delusion, that is, the hypocritical religious views of the society around him, caused many even at the time of publication to lock step as their ideology was threatened. Twain's last surviving daughter of the time, Clara Clemens Samossoud, decided to publish the work due to “...public opinion had become more tolerant...It was understood that another factor leading to Mrs. Samossoud's change of mind was her annoyance by Soviet charges that some of her father's ideas were being suppressed in the United States...”(1). This was in the face of the fact that Twain was

regarded as anti-religious and possibly communist during a time that was paradoxically more tolerant of ideas while being critical of anything considered anti-Christian or anti-American. She felt that allowing people to view the works themselves, so as to better understand her father, would be the only way to demonstrate the truth of his disillusionment, which sadly had a mixed result. Howard Mumford Jones highly praises the work, though admonishes the underlying points may be lost on devout Christians:

Bible Christians will necessarily find the book utterly blasphemous and wish Clara Clemens had not changed her mind. Better informed readers will wonder at the imaginative power of the greater passages in this volume, and ponder anew of man's capacity to be cruel that, after the horrors of Buchenwald and Hiroshima, has more relevance to the modern ethical problem than ever Twain anticipated. Students of Twain will be led to inquire even more closely into the complexities of a personality as enigmatic as any in American letters.

The fact that the work came under such heavy fire, first for being oppressed, then for being released, is reflective of the self-same desire to deny all unpleasant truths which Twain satirized. Coming on the relative heels of the first and second World Wars, the American population at large had taken a step toward convenient amnesia. That is, they were desperately trying to pretend the tragedies of the previous decades hadn't happened, and to turn toward patriotism and religion to sooth their troubled minds. Jones brings to the forefront the essence of "Letters From the Earth," one man's internal search for himself, and an emotional and ethical reconciliation with himself and his life. These factors even for an individual are infinite in scope, and during a time where the more enlightened of society were looking outward to find a common humanity, Twain's work spoke of the endless internal capacity of the mind and soul, which renders an attempt at communal understanding pointless in its absence.

“Letters from the Earth” begins with God's contemplation of creation and desire to perform a grand experiment. Expressing both a sincere and satirical viewpoint of the scope of God over creation, Twain describes the following scene:

The Creator sat upon the throne, thinking. Behind him stretched the illimitable continent of heaven, steeped in a glory of light and color; before him rose the black night of Space, like a wall. His mighty bulk towered rugged and mountain-like into the zenith, and His divine head blazed there like a distant sun. At His feet stood three colossal figures, diminished to extinction, almost, by contrast -- archangels -- their heads level with His ankle-bone (1).

Thus setting the stage for the satire of the work, Twain proceeds to describe the creation of the Earth and related creatures, during and following which Satan's sarcasm results in his being cast from Heaven. In the opening to this work, the Creator mirrors both Twain's loss for which he wishes closure, as well as the representation of religion as being the center point between his previous happiness and current emptiness. In the representation of a divine figure he separates Space, his emotional void, with the paradise or emotional resolution. The creator's head emblazed like the sun is indicative of Twain's focus on the mind, in which he seeks to come to terms both with religious hypocrisy and internal malaise. The contextualization of his inner struggle in this religious light is due to his long held, but at the time of this work acerbated, cynicism with religion which is essentially a justification of human behavior and tragedy alike. The three figures of the angels are both representative of the parts of his mind that wish to identify with religion, and the part that rebels. Likewise, it is worth noting this also is representative of his three lost loved ones and their finding a divinity which he cannot. In the role of Satan, Twain places himself as commentator of both the religious hypocrisies which he abhors, and the underlying feelings resultant from his personal tragedies. He takes it upon himself to

watch over God's new toys, as it were and the premise of "Letters from the Earth" is essentially his letter to Heaven and the archangels remaining therein. An important point that sets the tone for the entire novel is during the creation and description of animals, which indicates that so long as a creature acts within God's Will they do not sin, "The tiger -- yes. The law of his nature is ferocity. The law of his nature is the Law of God. He cannot disobey it.' 'Then in obeying it he commits no offense, Divine One?' 'No, he is blameless.'"(2). In this assertion Twain seeks to find meaning to human behavior, while at the same time finding himself drifting further away from the common Christianity of his time. In obeying the law of nature, the people that caused his financial loss were partially exculpated of their blame, and even the loss of his loved ones is just part of their nature, that is to die. The contrast here is while this is expressed as the true nature of humanity, it also removes the personal element from the cause of his depression. While the law of nature may provide a cold comfort to Twain with his financial loss, it also removes the individual element from his wife and daughters. Setting into play this contradictory example of purity in acting within one's God given, a framework is established for the remainder of "Letters from the Earth."

While they find some activities enjoyable, they have taboos against indulging in those acts. This is due to their belief that God wants them to abstain. However, God is the one that created humans and decided upon their nature, this includes drives for fornication, substance use, and other activities commonly perceived as vices. An example of this is their passion for, but refutation of, sexuality:

...The very thought of it excites him; opportunity sets him wild; in this state he will risk life, reputation, everything -- even his queer heaven itself -- to make good that opportunity and ride it to the overwhelming climax. From youth to middle age all men and all women prize copulation above all other pleasures

combined, yet it is actually as I have said: it is not in their heaven; prayer takes its place (4).

In this, Twain evinces at the most basic level, commentary on repression and displacement of natural drives. In this context he speaks of the sexual, but in addition this mirrors the prevalent sentiment in the work of the denial of natural law. By choosing as his example one of the most basic and intense physiological drives, he mirrors the emotional drive for not simply sexuality, but rather for an intensity and depth of connection that he lost with the passing of his wife. From the start, humanity has contrived a perspective of religion that has created a rigid set of rules for behavior that was not handed down by God. From their creation of the Bible:

It is full of interest. It has noble poetry in it; and some clever fables; and some blood-drenched history; and some good morals; and a wealth of obscenity; and upwards of a thousand lies. This Bible is built mainly out of the fragments of older Bibles that had their day and crumbled to ruin. So it noticeably lacks in originality, necessarily. Its three or four most imposing and impressive events all happened in earlier Bibles; all its best precepts and rules of conduct came also from those Bibles; there are only two new things in it: hell, for one, and that singular heaven I have told you about (5)

.In this, Twain not only provides a poke at religion, but at human nature overall. His commentary is reflective of his negative view of humans, and by extension himself, and the base drives that motivate him, particularly during his time of grief. The first two lines are telling of the left over feelings that possess him following his personal loss of both finances and family. The bible as a construct, which he addresses in the remainder of the section, is both indicative of his assertion of religion as a construct altered with the mutable and self-serving nature of humanity, and his own cobbled together justifications

for life and the afterlife as he seeks to come to terms with the losses of his wife and daughters. Lines three and four speak of a combination of fragments, of repetition and lack of original content in line with the common logic of his time. In the remaining, the reader finds a continuation of religious criticism as well as a subtle look into the internalized attempts of Twain to put his own suffering at ease. A hell in which his tormentors will be punished for wronging him, and a heaven in which his fallen family will dwell, to give him a feeling of rightness and peace to his loss. In his own cynical tone, he demonstrates the self-knowledge that these are in truth a fictitious construct of his own design, for his own self-serving needs. This common tie to the humanity that he continues to criticize is indicative of an acknowledgement of his own humanity, as well as his discontent with this realization. In the context of religion, this is reflective of Twain's belief that man, not God, has set the stage for most religious fallacy, and provides not so much a believable spirituality so much as a self-serving belief system that man breaks at his leisure.

Secondly, in "Letters from the Earth," humans view certain activities with great dislike, such as playing the harp or singing. While they either avoid or grudgingly engage in these activities on Earth, their view of Heaven is one where this is common occurrence, "By this time you will have noticed that the human being's heaven has been thought out and constructed upon an absolute definite plan...each and every imaginable thing that is repulsive to a man, and not a single thing he likes!" (5). This reflection of the inner working of himself and others is indicative of an emotional flagellation, serving as an attempt to justify the events viewed as punishments from the divine for not meeting a code of conduct that has been generated by society. Likewise, this mirrors Twain's own hypocritical views, while he criticizes humanity, for a self-serving and hypocritical paradigm, his own attempts at religious reconciliation mirror those of his fellows in

essence. His despondency over personal tragedy mirrors the expectations that sorrow is the common element to being alive, the difference lies in that his views of the living world versus the afterlife in terms of negativity versus positivity are invite. Additionally, while Twain possesses a form of morbid optimism regarding the afterlife, it is not so much as expectation of paradise so much as a removal of the elements of suffering and tedium present in the mundane daily existence. While society's view of God's disapproval for certain choices prevents their indulgence, they also feel as though they must perpetuate the lifestyle on Earth and in Heaven they feel He desires. Another practical note is that while they generally aren't proficient with such activities as singing or playing the harp, they expect to intuitively be adept at both in the afterlife. Also, there is the point of their having this view of Heaven, but not spending their lives becoming proficient at these things. It is as if they expect as part of their reward for abstaining from what they feel is sinful, not only do they go to Heaven but they also are made to enjoy what they dislike on Earth and to be masterful at it. This reflects the notion of finding joy in suffering, and producing shame toward things humanity secretly desire. Rather than being true to their nature, as Twain admonishes, they instead build a prison for themselves that even in the afterlife they do not escape.

Third, between these two viewpoints there exists the conclusion that humans despite being made to enjoy pleasure, instead try to force themselves to instead enjoy suffering. The things God created them to like as part of their nature they steadfastly avoid, all the while attempting to make themselves come to enjoy activities that they dislike. This falls back to the point of their having created or synthesized a religion that incorporates the interpretations of humans along with their various motivations rather than acting on natural law, which was made by God. To compound this is the hypocrisy shown by God. An example would be punishing Adam and Eve for eating from the fruit

of knowledge even though they were not mentally capable at the time of understanding the situation:

Naturally you will think the threat to punish Adam and Eve for disobeying was of course not carried out, since they did not create themselves, nor their natures nor their impulses nor their weaknesses...It will surprise you to know that the threat was carried out. Adam and Eve were punished, and that crime finds apologists unto this day. The sentence of death was executed (7).

Reflective of Twain's own issues with the Christian God, those of the punishment of the moral innocent if the religious standard of the time is to be believed, this passage also reflects back on his feelings of loss. Twain's viewpoint is evident here, if a God has decided to punish Twain or his loved ones, it is due to no greater reason than being true to their natures and personal circumstances. The imagery of Adam and Eve as the primordial innocents, representative of the everyman, likewise symbolizes the situation in which if there is in fact a God, he does not play by his own rules. This is his attempt to make sense, or at least offer an explanation, of how he can be punished by losing his loved ones, and they themselves with their respective demises. This section of the text demonstrates humans exist in both a self-created hypocrisy, as well as one created by God. In this humans have created a religion, and figurehead, that acts as it desires regardless of its own imposed rules for others. This ultimately is the human spirit, one that society attempts to subsume into religious ritual and rigid structures of societal and Christian law.

Overall, even through the lens of the selected passages, Twain's inner struggle with depression and loss, expressed through religious lens, is evident. The progression of the entirety of the text begins with a creation that is inferior to a divine figure that serves as a hypocritical arbitrator of law, and obstacle between the emptiness and paradise. The

artificial constructs put forth by humans mirror those of their creator, and vice versa. From the point of the internal mind being a focus as expressed by the imagery of God's head as a sun, "Letters from the Earth" in totality progresses from the logical fallacies and inconsistencies of humans to those of their creator. Whether interpreted as strictly a criticism of religion, or viewed as a commentary on the internal processes of grief, the summation is that the interior world of the mind projects and is projected upon by society. Twain's own internal battles, through the lens of the source text, begin with the creator figure as an obstacle. The profession that natural law is not sin, later refuted by God's punishment of Adam and Eve, is demonstrative of a truth and opposition of which the author himself wrestled. If he follows religious thoughts, his loss is that due to either divine punishment or simply a law of nature. The former is hypocritical and cruel, the latter removes the element of the individual which made his wife and daughters so special to Twain. The artificial constructs in which society placed its faith are analogous conceptually to Twain's viewpoint of youth in which we create our own truth out of those things we cannot admit to ourselves or others, simultaneously asserting that no matter how skewed there is a reason for how life turns out. The latter hypocrisy of God in "Letters from the Earth" speaks of the fact that no constructed perception of the nature of existence stands up in the face of reality. No matter how optimistic or pessimistic Twain's world view, or his reasoning for life being kind or cruel, life serves to undermine those notions seemingly at whim.

The humans of Twain's text attempt to find justification for their own construction. Some feel that the reason they choose to abstain from pleasurable experience is that they wish to avoid distractions from their faith or what they feel are impurities of the spirit. In this way they can keep their focus on God and their spiritual well-being. Which in and of itself falls flat, as this becomes not a desire to live a life of

goodness, but rather a desire to avoid punishment. In addition, by forcing themselves to act outside their nature for the sake of the reward, they are both being insincere and defeating the purpose of their choice to abstain. Those that do act out of altruism rather than desire of reward still do not see that they are acting outside of how He created them. The very nature of their viewpoint of what God desires they have pieced together themselves and in general do not have certifiable proof of having been God-inspired. When comparing what they have decided God wants of them versus what they have the nature to desire, they opt for the former in the face of logic.

The religious shift undertaken by Twain as a result of his personal tragedies, from a more humanistic approach to psychoanalysis, is demonstrated by Bruno Bettelheim's interpretation of Freud's psychoanalytical theory which has an eye on a humanistic element. Twain's financial loss in his later years combined with the deaths of two of his daughters and his wife led to a religious pessimism and cynical view of humanity. His reference to being a positive atheist originated in these feelings and his attempts to find reconciliation with the events that had taken so much from him in such a short span of time. These facets were exacerbated by the hypocrisy of his fellow human kind in terms of societal interactions and religiosity. Despite his eventual disdain for the Christianity of his time, Twain nonetheless maintained a sense of the spiritual devoid of false human constructs. Critics of his work at the time it was published saw simply a person they deemed antireligious or anti-American, a malcontent that wished to mock or subvert traditional values. A few individuals of the time recognized the profound internal issues which haunted Twain during the writing of "Letters from the Earth," and the soul searching that was truly represented. The combination of a humanistic psychoanalysis of select sections of his work along with the inherent satirical interpretations on religion expressed through "Letter From the Earth" indicate the underlying issues and feelings

that he was trying to work through as well as his personal discontent. A facet that is missed in interpretations that focus strictly on religiosity in this work are the indicators of the author himself present within the text. Just as the symbolism mirrors the satirical and hypocritical social construct of Christianity, so too does it hide within itself elements of Twain's struggle. The progression of the text does not simply show a consistent false logic, but rather the inner thoughts and feelings with which he evaluates and refutes assertions made to himself as he seeks solace for his losses.

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